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ABSTRACT

A study focused on isolating the differences in perceptions community newspaper editors have about the functions of their newspapers, and determining how those attitudes affect the editors' definition of news and, ultimately, the content of the newspapers. The study hypothesized (1) that the perceptions community newspaper editors have toward the functions of their papers fall into two clusters of beliefs--the feedback and the distributive orientations toward the functions of the community press--and (2) that the more editors are oriented toward a feedback function of the press the more they will view stories providing feedback as newsworthy and the more distributive oriented they are the more they will view distributive stories as newsworthy. Data were gathered through a pretested questionnaire and studied using factor analysis and correlation methods. Community editors, responding that the most important function of the community press is to present facts to inform readers, rated investigative and analytical functions much lower. Editors who believe strongly in a feedback function of the community press were found to be more likely to see as newsworthy events that place the focus on community problems and conflict, while those who are distributive oriented de-emphasized conflict and emphasized stories that give information about upcoming events such as routine official meetings or civic projects. Tables and footnotes are appended. (SRT)

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EDITORS' ATTITUDES TOWARD FUNCTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY PRESS

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> *But the fact is that most small dailies and weeklies are the backyard of the trade, repositories for any piece of journalistic junk tossed over the fence...*
>
> --Ben Bagdikian[1]

INTRODUCTION

Community journalism has been labeled the backyard of the trade by critics.[2] Journalism professors and scholars often deride it or ignore it altogether.[3] Practicing daily journalists belittle it, although many dream of "retiring" some day with their own small weeklies to run. The memoirs published by former and current community journalists describing the good fights they fought on Main Street[4] and the occasional Pulitzer Prize tossed to a small town weekly perpetuate the myth that, except for a few rugged individuals, it's a bland, bland world out there.

But the "country" is changing rapidly as the population continues to pour out of the central cities into not only the suburbs, but also the small, rural towns within commuting distance of cities. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 1984 that for the first time in the nation's history, more people moved out of the cities than moved into them. A total of 5.2 million people moved out of central cities while 2.7 million moved in. The suburbs collectively gained a net of 2.36 million persons. Of the 3 million people who left the suburbs, 1.8 million went to central cities and 1.2 million moved out of metropolitan areas entirely.[5]

Sociologists have begun to express concern that the population shift is greatly altering the nature of many communitites as their residents begin to feel the pressures and influence of metropolitan life.[6] As the countryside fills up with people, major issues include the physical strain on ecological resources and services and the sociological strain on communities changing from relatively homogeneous societies to pluralistic ones. Naisbitt[7] views the shift from urban to rural as part of a general decentralization trend in America. Ex-urbanites are spreading their culture to rural counties and small towns and that is why small-town and suburban newspapers are flourishing--because "city folks have brought writing skills, education, and a taste for Pulitzer Prize winning journalism."[8] The "nouveau rurals" expect the services they enjoyed in the city including good roads and good newspapers.

This study attempts to isolate differences in perceptions nondaily editors have about the functions of their newspapers and determine how those attitudes affect the editors' definition of news, and, ultimately, the content of the newspapers. This area of journalism has the potential for substantial change during the next few years as the population shifts to the Sunbelt states such as Texas as well as from urban to rural areas.

RESEARCH REVIEW

The term "community journalism" means different things to different people, and researchers should use the term cautiously to avoid misunderstandings. The pot called "community journalism" has included a variety of media ranging from small-

town weeklies to big-city dailies, from urban ethnic publications to suburban shoppers and has also taken in publications catering to "communities" based on age, sex, class and lifestyle, mental and physical handicaps and special interests ranging from auto racers to philatelists.[9]

Padgett[10] offers a broad definition that defines a community newspaper as a medium whose uniqueness resides in its primary role as the disseminator of local and locally oriented information to a largely local audience. He suggests finer distinctions can be made through a classification system which utilize five characteristic categories: circulation type (paid or free), frequency of publication (weekly, semi-weekly, tri-weekly, daily), area of circulation (neighborhood, urban, suburban, small town, county, regional), content emphasis (traditional news/editorial, social/calendar, politics/art/entertainment), dissemination, (watchdog).[11]

But to simply label a community newspaper any combination of these characteristics contributes little to the understanding of the medium, Padgett warns. For instance, the paid legal weekly newspaper published in a small town setting with the goal of disseminating information and/or serving as a watchdog is quite different from the free social calendar types published as suburban shoppers for the primary purpose of commercial gain through the sale of advertising.

This study will focus on paid subscription newspapers. Although some free-distribution newspapers appear to attempt to present a news-editorial content, most use news copy--most of it

canned--to fill the space around the ads. The problems of editors of free papers are much different than those of editors of newspapers that attempt to present the news of the community to paid subscribers. The study does not separate urban, suburban or small town and rural newspapers, but includes them all if they are nondaily newspapers. Although the size and types of communities served by the newspapers vary considerably, nondaily newspapers usually do not subscribe to a news wire service and thus rely on their own staffs to gather and write the news, which is almost invariably local. It is that problem--what to put (or not,put) in the paper--that this study addresses. More specifically, the project studies how editors' perceptions about the functions of their community newspapers affect the decision of what they put in or leave out of their newspapers.

Researchers have pursued two general paths in their search for an explanation for the content of community or nondaily newspapers. One general approach studies the role of the newspaper in the social structure, an analysis of the function of newspapers and how the structure (environment, community) determines the function and therefore the content of the comunity newspaper. The second approach focuses on the persons involved with gathering, writing and editing the news and what effects they may have on the news content.

Structure and Community Journalism

The ideal of the news media as mechanisms of social control is not a new one. Wright[12] concluded that many of the functions of mass-communicated activities (surveillance, correlation,

cultural transmission and entertainment) can be interpreted as social mechanisms for minimizing or counteracting the dysfunctions produced by another activity to keep the system from breaking down.

The role of the media in community conflict is often recognized and frequently the media are charged with creating the conflicts. They may be accused of sensationalizing and blowing situations out of proportion, of covering up and not paying attention to all sides.[13] Members of the media reply that bringing issues into the open is a necessary contribution to democratic processes.[14]

Tichenor, Donohue and Olien[15] contend that conflict is not necessarily a negative factor in communication. Social and political organizations provide a variety of mechanisms for regulating conflict in the interest of general social control. Conflict may be regulated by formal procedures such as labor negotiations and public hearings, and the newspaper may function much the same way. In fact, one of the newspaper's primary functions, according to Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, is social control, which it performs by drawing attention to the "oughts and naughts" that generally prevail.[16] The newspaper performs these functions not necessarily by overt moralizing, but often through news selection that enforces values by implication.

Janowitz[17] found that the community press sharply limited the reporting of controversy. Readers polled by Janowitz did not see the community newspaper as a forum for concentrating on social

debates but as any other business or agency that should encourage and develop community spirit and growth. Weeklies maintain local consensus by emphasizing common values rather than atempting to solve "values-in-conflict" problems.[18] He discovered that most of the papers avoided editorializing and concentrated on booster news of community expansion.

Vidich and Benson's study[19] of a small town in New York describes the functions of illusion-maintenance: "There is silent recognition among members of the community that facts and ideas which are disturbing to the accepted system of illusions are not to be verbalized." Shaw and Irwin,[20] in their study of 117 Washington weeklies, found that half of the publishers interviewed do not consider the main function of their newspapers to transmit factual information, but to promote and develop "community consciousness." Edelstein and Schulz,[21] documented small community leaders' criticisms of the conflict content of the local newspaper as a threat to community structure and values.

In a Minnesota study,[22] more than half (59 percent) of the weekly papers reported no local governmental conflict of any kind during a one-month period, while 80 percent of the daily newspapers in the study reported some aspect of local governmental conflict. Hvistendahl[23] found weeklies less aggressive than twice-weekly papers in getting information from public records in their communities. Litigation was assumned by Drechsel, Netteburg and Aborisade[24] to be an

indication of social disruption. They found less local court reporting in smaller communities than in larger communities.

Community Journalists Studies

The role of the journalist in determining content of community newspapers is a vastly under-researched topic.[25] A survey of weekly newspapers in Illinois and Nebraska by Stonecipher and Anderson[26] found that weekly newspaper editors and publishers regard staff shortages, insufficient time to function effectively as journalists, lack of young journalistic "generalists" and inadequate financial bases as major problems facing them. The implication is that the journalists themselves are unhappy with their product and would like it to be something other than the backyard of the trade.

Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman,[27] in a nationwide survey of over 1,300 working journalists, found two viewpoints or orientations regarding journalism among the respondents--neutral and participant. Proponents of the neutral school see news as emerging naturally from events and the journalist plays the role of spectator to the ongoing social process, transmitting accurate communcations about it. Responsible journalism is achieved by adherence to norms of objectivity, factual accuracy and verification of information. Journalistic sins to neutral journalists include biased, sensational or excessive coverage.

The participant, according to Johnstone et al., must play a more active role in developing the newsworthy. Reporters must report news in context, sifting through information to find

implications, causes and meaning. The participant journalist does not expect the news to reveal itself naturally, but must sift through sources and leads to find the real story. To be newsworthy, information must be reported in context, and the journalist's task is to provide the background and interpretation necessary to give events meaning. Cardinal sins for the participant journalist are news suppression and superficiality.

The respondents in the Johnstone survey rated the importance of eight different aspects of news media performance selected to reflect values consistent with both "participant" and "neutral" images of press functions. The four functions the researchers felt were consistent with images of a socially responsible particpant press are the investigative, analytic, interepretive and educational functions. The press functions more in keeping with the image of a "neutralized" libertarian press are: getting information to the public as quickly as possible, an emphasis on verified information, concentration on news which is of interest to the widest possible public and entertainment.[28]

More general support was found by Johnstone et al. among journalists for participant rather than for neutral media functions. Receiving the most support was the investigative function, followed by analysis and interpretation of complex problems, getting information to the public as quickly as possible, discussing national policy while it is still being developed, staying away from stories where factial content cannot be verified, concentration on news which is of interest to the

widest possible public, developing intellectual and cultural intersts of the public, and finally, providing entertainment and relaxation. In other words, the first-, second-, fourth- and seventh-ranked functions were participant functions, and the third-, fifth-, sixth- and eighth-ranked functions were neutral functions.

Formal schooling has the strongest effect on the endorsement of participant values. City size and informal colleague relations also have direct effects. The authors conclude that participant views of journalistic responsiblity emerge from one's experiences in higher education and are reinforced by working in an urban environment. Neutral values are influenced by a lack of exposure to higher education, working in smaller communities and being older. Neutral images of journalistic repsonbility emerge as a function of on-the-job rather than academic training and are reinforced by a journalist's formal ties to the local social environment.[29]

Culbertson[30] found that journalists' beliefs form three independent clusters, rather than the two portrayed by Johnstone et al., and they don't fall neatly on a single continuum. Culbertson's labels are "traditional" (similar to Johnstone's neutral perspective), "idealistic interpretive" and "activist." Belief in interpretation involves defining implications and causes, not simply reporting facts. Traditional views endorse conventional decision rules related to news such as timeliness, consequence and human interest. Activism involves a concern with space/time and front-office constraints that can limit treatment of controversy.

In his study of 258 news personnel from 17 newspapers, Culbertson found that traditionalists emphasize local and spot news and down grade interpretive and national-international material. Activists and interpreters are inclined to downgrade local news. Also, interpreters tend to upgrade national material, and activists upgrade international material. Both interpreters and activists tend to stress investigative reporting. Activists do so at the expense of spot news. Interpreters, however, downgrade human interest rather than spot news because they feel that interpretation should build thorough coverage of events, including spot news. Culbertson also found that job history and newspaper attributes have an effect on beliefs about news. People with many years of media experience tend to downgrade investigative material slightly. Veterans have traditional views.[31]

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

This study is an atempt to answer some of the questions raised by the Johnstone et al. and Culbertson studies about perceptions of the functions of newspapers, but with the community or nondaily newspaper as the target. Thus the proposed functions of newspapers and hypothetical stories used in the questionnaire to measure editors' perceptions are tailored to community journalism. A dichotomy will be explored based on Tichenor, Olien and Donohue's description of the content of community newspapers and its relation to the function of the community press.

The participant-neutral dichotomy of journalists proposed by Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman[32] is not necessarily appropriate for community journalism. A "neutral" journalist, according to Johnstone et al., is one who takes an objective view of the news, which neutral journalists believe flows naturally from events. But a community journalist, may eschew "objectivity" if it means covering an event that would place the community in a bad light. Therefore, such a journalist could not be classified as the neutral type, but neither would he or she be a "participant." The cardinal sin for the participant journalist, according to Johnstone et al., is suppressing news. To be sure, there are both types within the community press, but the neutral-participant continuum is not appropriate.

Community journalists perhaps fall more neatly in line with Culbertson's three-cluster orientations of traditional, idealistic-interpretive and activist.[33] Culbertson's "traditional" journalist, he says, is similar to Johnstone's "neutral" journalist and herein lies the problem with trying to use the label with community journalists. "Traditional" to the daily journalist may in fact include, as Culbertson describes, an endorsement of conventional decision rules related to news elements such as timeliness and consequence, but such elements may be different in community journalism. "Tradition" in the community press, according to Janowitz, Breed and others,[34] is the suppression of any news that is perceived to threaten the stability of the community and instead publishing "good" news that tends to bolster community pride and/or economic well-being. Timeliness, consequence and other "traditional" rules of what is

news may have little to do with the content of the community press. Culbertson's idealist-interpreter is similar to Johnstone's participant. Perhaps a community journalist who hopes to interpret for his or her community can be considered an idealist, but so might a community editor who tries to report objectively the routine news of the day, whether or not it is "good" for the community. Culbertson's third type of journalist--the activist--is described as one concerned with space/time constraints as well as front-office pressure that can limit treatment of controversy. This type is probably the most realistic to apply to the community press and will be combined with some aspects of the idealist-interpreter type to comprise one end of the community editor dichotomy this research seeks to discover.

The basis for the proposed dichotomy is rooted in Tichenor, Olien and Donohue's analysis of the relation of the content of the community press to its function.[35] The content is of two types: distributive and feed-back. Distributive information requires no further communication or discussion, such as routine reports of meetings, announcements of upcoming events and other community bulletin board-type items. Information can provide feedback to a community by drawing attention to problems and social issues through analysis, interpretation and commentary. Such information requires some response of the community either through direct communication back to the newspaper or through communication within the community. Maintenance of social stability is facilitated by the press through

its focus on conflicts that they might be resolved. A single news item can be both feedback and distributional in nature such as a report of a city council meeting at which a controversial vote was taken.

Hypotheses

"Distributive" and "feedback" refer to types of information and can also be viewed as types of informational control. Distributive information is for routine consumption and consists of that which is received and acted upon without necessarily requiring any further communication back to the newspaper. Control of distributive information, or distributive control, is based on selective dissemination of information as well as selective withholding of information. Feedback information provides feedback to society through analysis, interpretation and criticism and is information which focuses attention for public discussion on social issues within the community.

Earlier studies cited[36] have emphasized the distributive information content of nondaily newspapers. Critics and researchers have proclaimed community journalism a breeding ground for such information. Such overall hypotheses as the smaller the community the more distributive the content have been supported within the entire realm of newspapers--in other words, when all sizes of publications are considered, from the largest daily to the smallest weekly.

This study predicts the existence within the nondaily journalistic world of men and women who believe that the function

of their papers is to provide feedback to the community. Hypothesis 1, therefore, is that the perceptions community newspaper editors have toward the functions of their newspapers fall into two clusters of beliefs: the feedback and distributive orientations toward the functions of the community press.

The two types of orientations toward the function of the community press predicted in Hypothesis 1 (feedback and distributive) are in turn related to the orientation of editors towards news. Orientation towards news is defined as what an editor considers newsworthy and to what degree. Hypothesis 2 predicts that the more editors are oriented toward a feedback function of the press, the more they will view as newsworthy stories which provide feedback or feedback-type information. And the corollary to this is that the more editors are oriented toward a distributive function of the press, the more they will view as newsworthy distributive-type information or stories.

The Survey

Data was gathered through a pre-tested questionnare mailed in June, 1984, to 228 newspaper editors selected by a systematic random sample taken from the 1984 Texas Press Association list of Texas nondaily newspapers.[37] The sample size was 50 percent of the total number of newspapers. After a second mailing to non-responders, useable responses numbered 170, representing a 75 percent return rate, considered an excellent rate by most survey experts. Although results can only be generalized to Texas nondaily newspapers, editors and researchers in other states may find them useful because of the diversity and number of nondaily newspapers in Texas.

Following tabulation of the responses, the research proceeded in three steps in an attempt to define the two major perceptions of notdaily newspaper editors regarding the functions of their newspapers within the community.

First, a factor analysis was done to identify specific beliefs that might help define each viewpoint toward functions of the newspaper.

In the second step, correlations between the belief clusters and attitudes of editors toward the newsworthiness of specific hypothetical stories were studied. The feedback function was expected to correlate with editors' attitudes toward the newsworthiness of stories that were of the interpretive, analytical-critical nature. The distributive function was expected to correlate with editors' attitudes toward the newsworthiness of the more routine, distributive-type news stories.

In the third phase, the relationship between the orientations and background variables of the editors as well as characteristics of the social structure surrounding the respondents' publications were studied to discover predictors of the orientations toward the function of the nondaily press. The assumption here is that the editors of such publications hold sway over the content of their newspapers. Whether the editor sees his or her publication as merely a community bulletin board or as a mechanism to provide an outlet for feedback within the community (or both) will therefore affect the kind of information that appears in the newspaper.

Operational Definitions and Linkages

Hypothesis 1 predicts the existence of two kinds of perceptions community editors have toward the function of their newspaper: feedback and distributive. The perceptions can be indicated by how editors rate the importance of various suggested functions of the press. Editors who select the "extremely important" category--the highest on a four-point Likert-type scale--are assumed to strongly approve the function being rated. The ten functions used in this research represent adaptations of the functions used by Johnstone et al.[38] but altered to be more relevant to community newspapers. They are:

1. Investigate claims and statements made by the local government.
2. Provide analysis and interpretation of community problems.
3. Bring facts about the community so readers will be informed.
4. Provide comment on local government, social and business affairs.
5. Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified.
6. Unify feelings in the community by not covering conflict.
7. Serve as an advertising medium to aid local shoppers and merchants.
8. Provide entertainment and relaxation for readers.
9. Publicize programs for community betterment and welfare.
10. To be a successful business operation for the owners.

The four-point scale to measure the editors' attitudes was identical to that used in the Johnstone et al. survey: extremely

important (4), quite important (3), somewhat important (2) and not really important (1).

Through factor analysis, belief clusters can be identified along the predicted dimensions of feedback and distributional functions. The feedback dimension is indicated by the investigative, analytical and editorial functions (No. 1, 2 and 4 above). The distributive dimension is indicated by the latter six of the listed functions. The third function above--to bring facts about the community so readers will be informed--is expected to load strongly on both dimensions.

The first hypothesis would be supported if the dimensions of the factor analysis fall along the clusters predicted. A minimum loading factor of .40 will be required for the dimensions.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that the two types of orientations toward functions of the community press--feedback and distributional--are related to the orientations editors have toward what is newsworthy. How editors rate the newsworthiness of specific events depends greatly on what they believe to be the function of their newspapers. Therefore, rating news stories for their newsworthiness could be considered to be a measurement or indicator of how editors feel about functions of the nondaily press.

To create a comprehensive measure of newsworthiness, two composite variables will be created from an additional factor analysis and scale computation. Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale (1=not newsworthy, 5=very newsworthy) the news value of the following hypothetical stories:

1. Chamber of commerce president arrested for DWI.
2. County commissioner charged with embezzling gasoline from county filling station.
3. City council meets at mayor's house in private, unposted meeting.
4. Local real estate development accused by state of discharging sewage into local stream.
5. Regularly scheduled city council meeting.
6. Heated exchange between two school board members during a meeting.
7. Schedule for upcoming town festival.
8. Analysis of quality of local schools.
9. Announcement of comunitywide cleanup day.

Items 1,2,3,4,6 and 8 represent potentially controversial topics and were intended to gauge how strongly editors feel about content negative to the community. The first and second items are public record items. Editors should have no fear of legal reprisal for publishing such items. Editors who rate either of these items as not newsworthy likely would do so for fear of non-legal reprisal from printing negative news about community leaders. The fourth item--the real estate development accused by the state of discharging sewage into a local stream--is also a public record story but involves at least two additional factors that might cause some editors to shy away from it: it propagates a negative news of the community to outsiders, and a local business and potential advertiser is singled out. The public health angle could conceivably charge more editorial interest, however.

Item 3, the illegal city council meeting, and item 8, the

analysis of local schools, were meant to be enterprise reporting topics. To report the illegal meeting, the editor would have to be aware of the Texas Open Meetings Law, which prohibits both unannounced and private meetings of public panels except for a few narrowly defined exceptions. Also, to write of such an incident would require the editor to accuse local leaders--i.e., friends, acquaintances, advertisers-of wrongdoing. It's the kind of story that wouldn't be missed if it wasn't reported. The analysis of the quality of local schools also requires initiative to report and has the potential of being critical. Such a story would also not be missed if it weren't published.

Items 5,7 and 9 are bulletin board-type stories that fit the definition of distributive news. The regular meeting report is expected by readers and can consist of an account of what took place, what was officially approved and disapproved. Johnstone et al.[39] found that neutral editors placed a great deal of importance on such regular news events. Item 6--the heated exchange between two school board members--was included to determine how it compared on the newsworthiness scale with coverage of a regular city council meeting. The prediction is that many more people would consider the meeting more newsworthy than a controversial event showing conflict within the community at a similar meeting. Items 7 and 8--the schedule for the town festival and the cleanup announcement--are further examples of the bulletin board-type items that fulfill a newspaper's distributive function.

The relationship between the two orientations editors have

toward newsworthiness can be determined through correlation using Pearson's r between the scales created from both sets of dimensions revealed through the two separate factor analyses. The first factor analysis would determine dimensions of attitudes toward the function of community newspapers. The second factor analysis would compute newsworthiness dimensions based on loadings of responses to the hypothetical stories. Items 1,2,3,4,6 and 8 are predicted to load on one dimension--a feedback information dimension--and items 5,7 and 9 are predicted to load on another dimension, a distributive information dimension. The factor loadings will be used to construct a scale which will determine a newsworthiness score for each respondent and will be used for correlation with the respondent's score on a function scale determined in a similar manner from the results of the first factor analysis.

RESULTS

Attitudes Toward Functions of Community Press

Attitudes editors maintain toward the functions of their newspapers were measured by comparing responses to the importance of ten different functions of the nondaily press. As predicted, the fact-gathering function elicited the highest response in the "extremely important" rating on the four-point scale (Table 1). The percentage of respondents who felt that an extremely important function of their newspapers was to "bring facts about the community so readers will be informed" was 82.2 percent.

The publicizing of community programs received the second highest "extremely important" response (75 percent). This was

followed by a business function: "to serve as an advertising medium" (70.4 percent). Fourth was "stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified" (66.3 percent). Fifth was "to be a successful business operation for the owners" (64.7 percent).

The feedback functions--to analyze, investigate and editorialize--were sixth, seventh and ninth, respectively, in the ranking of "extremely important" reponses. The analysis function was rated extremely important by only 36.3 percent of the editors; the investigative function, by 34.3 percent; and the editorializing function, by only 25.1 percent.

The entertainment function received the second to lowest number of "extremely important" responses--21.4 percent. Surprisingly, the least most important function of the nondaily press, according to the respondents, is "to unify feelings in the community by not covering community conflict." The low-rating of the anti-conflict function provides evidence that nondaily editors aren't as consensus-oriented as critics believe. But the low response to the "avoid conflict" function might be the result of editors knowing the "right" answer when asked directly if they do such a thing. Their relatively low response to the watchdog functions and the low number of local editorials and local endorsements indicate an avoidance of conflict and a paradox. While they <u>say</u> they don't avoid conflict, they report they don't perform functions that have the potential of focusing on conflict.

In order to identify the two predicted orientations toward

the functions of the community press (Hypothesis 1), respondents' beliefs about the functions of the nondaily press were factor analyzed. The results (Table 2) were computed on a varimax rotated matrix after rotation with Kaiser normalization.

Three positions were extracted in the analysis. These can be regarded as different orientations toward the functions of the community newspaper. The prediction was that the investigative, analytical and editorial functions would load on one dimension, meaning that editors who felt the investigative function was extremely important would also rate the analysis and editorial functions as extremely important. Factors predicted to load on a different dimension were the remaining functions, minus the fact-gathering function.

The three feedback functions loaded heavily on Factor 1 as predicted: to investigate (.62), to provide analysis and interpretation of community problems (.84), and to provide editorial comment on local government, social and business affairs, (.57).

The second dimension, identified as Factor 2 in the factor analysis, loaded strongly on three of the six predicted distributive variables: publicize programs for community betterment and welfare, .47; provide entertainment and relaxation for readers, .42; and stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified, .40. The conflict avoidance function (unify feelings in the community by not covering conflict) loaded .24 on the distributive dimension, not heavily enough to include in scale contruction for the distributive orientation,

but relatively strong, especially since the variable loaded negatively on the other two dimensions. The advertising function loaded .32 on the distributive editor dimension (and .00 on the feedback dimension), while the business function loaded only .05 on the distributive dimension and .02 on the feedback dimension.

The information function (bring facts about the community so readers will be informed) loaded moderately on both the feedback and distributive dimensions, as predicted. However, the .39 loading on the distributive dimension was stronger than the .23 on the feedback scale. Editors who lean either way--feedback or distributive--believe in the information function.

A third dimension indentified as a commercial dimension loaded heavily on only one variable: to be a successful business operation for its owners (factor loading .90). A second variable, the advertising function, missed the cutoff barely with a factor loading of .39. Both the advertising and business functions, which were identified as a separate dimension through the factor analysis, were predicted to load on the distributive dimension, but did not exceed the .40 level.

A factor-scale composite variable labeled "feedback orientation" was constructed from responses to the importance of the investigative, analytical and editorial functions of the newspaper, using the following formula:[40]

$$\text{feedback orientation} = \text{factor score (variable A} - \bar{X}/SD + \text{factor score (variable B} - \bar{X})/SD$$

where $\bar{X}$ = mean, and SD = standard deviation

The factor score of each variable in the scale was multiplied by the variable score (1=not really important, 2=somewhat important, 3=quite important, 4=extremely important) less the mean of the variable divided by the standard deviation of the variable. This produced a continuous variable (feedback orientation) which ranged from -4.72 to 2.35 with a mean of .009 and standard deviation of 1.63.

A second composite variable--distributive orientation--was created through a similar scale construction but using the variables comprised of responses to the importance of the functions: publicizing, entertainment and the avoidance of unverifiable stories. The distributive editor continuous variable ranged from -3.51 to 1.08, with a mean of .008 and standard deviation of .86.

Hypothesis 1 predicted the two orientations (feedback and distributive) toward the functions of the community press by editors. Although the factor analysis revealed three orientations, the third, unpredicted dimension--commercial--seems relatively unimportant for this research at this time. Since one dimension--feedback orientation--loaded exactly as predicted, and the second dimension--distributive orientation--loaded strongly on three of the predicted factors, Hypothesis 1 is supported by the findings.

Newsworthiness and Functions of Community Press

The second hypothesis predicted that the two types of orientations toward the function of the community press (feedback and distributive) are in turn related to the orientation of

editors toward newsworthiness of hypothetical stories. Specifically, Hypothesis 2 predicted that the more editors are oriented toward a feedback function of the press, the more they view as newsworthy stories which provide feedback-type information.

The mean scores of the newsworthiness of the stories as rated by respondents are listed in Table 3. The means ranged from a low of 2.95 for the story about the chamber of commerce president arrested for DWI to 4.34 for the illegal city council meeting (the scale consisted of five rankings, ranging from 1, not newsworthy, to 5, very newsworthy). The feedback and distributive stories were interspersed throughout the newsworthiness ranking. The most newsworthy story (the private city council meeting) was a feedback story, but was followed closely by a distributive story, the schedule for the town festival. Third was the analysis of public schools, predicted to be a feedback item. The fourth and fifth most newsworthy stories were feedback-type: the real estate development pollution and the county commissioner embezzlement. The sixth and seventh most newsworthy items--the regular city council and the cleanup announcement--are both distributive news. The final two items are feedback stories: the heated exchange between two school board members and the arrest of the chamber of commerce president for DWI.

Results of a factor analysis of the attitudes toward newsworthiness of the specific hypothetical situations are in

Table 4. Results were computed on a varimax rotated factor matrix after rotation with Kaiser normalization.

Factor 1 is composed of the DWI, illegal meeting, pollution, embezzlement and fight stories. The strongest loading was on the embezzlement story (.76), followed by the pollution story (.69), the illegal meeting (.69), the DWI story (.59) and the fight (.48). The stories loading heavily on this dimension are operationalizations of a feedback press. Editors who think the five stories are newsworthy could be said to be endorsing the feedback function. A factor-scale variable was constructed from the five variables, using the same formula cited above. This produced a continuous variable that ranged from -8.02 to 9.0, with a mean of -.01 and standard deviation of 2.41.

The second dimension revealed by the factor analysis consists of the regular meeting, festival schedule and cleanup announcement, loaded .54, .76 and .86 respectively. The critique of local schools loaded .44 on this dimension but was not used when creating he composite variable because the critique also weighted moderately (.31) on the first dimension.

Hypothesis 2 called for a relationship between the orientations toward the functions of the newspaper and how editors feel about the newsworthiness of certin news stories. Specifically, Hypothesis 2 predicted that the more the editor is oriented toward a feedback function of the press, the more he or she still view as newsworthy stories which provide feedback or feedback-type information.

The composite variables created with the factor scores from both factor analyses were correlated using Pearson's r. Results are listed in Table 5. The feedback orientation correlated ($r=.29, p<.001$) with the feedback newsworthiness variable ($r=-.04$, ns). The distributive function variable correlated ($r=.33, p<.001$) with the distributive newsworthiness variable but not with the feedback newsworthiness variable ($r=.13$, ns). In other words, there was a relatively strong positive correlation between the orientation an editor has toward the feedback function of the press and feedback stories and likewise a relatively strong correlation between the distributive function and the distributive news stories. To put it yet another way, editors who believe strongly in the feedback function of the press will likely consider feedback news items highly newsworthy, and editors who believe strongly in the distributive function of the press will believe distributive news stories to be highly newsworthy. The evidence supports Hypothesis 2.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Community editors in the survey said the most important function of the community press is to present facts to inform readers, whereas the information function was rated only third in the Johnstone et al. survey of news people nationwide.[41] Nationally, among news people in general, Johnstone et al. found journalists ranked the investigative and analytical functions ahead of the information function. But community editors in the present study ranked the investigative and analytical functions seventh and sixth, respectively. Shaw and Irwin[42] found

in their study of Washington weeklies more than twenty years ago that publishers do not consider the main function of their newspapers to transmit factual information, but to promote and develop "community consciousness." In the present study, the factual function was indeed the prime function of the community newspaper, according to the editors.

The results of this survey seem to contradict some of Janowitz' findings among community newspaper readers who did not see the community newspaper as a forum for concentrating on social debates.[43] Of all ten functions of the community press studied, the one receiving the weakest endorsement by community editors was the function, to unify the community by avoiding social conflict. While the disparity could be a result of the differences in perceptions of the functions of the press by readers and editors, it also could mean a change over the past quarter century in attitudes about the community press. In general, the results of this survey fall somewhere between attitudes of journalists as a whole and previous studies of community journalists.

The evidence presented in this report supports the primary thrust of the research that there are some editors who work for community newspapes who try to thwart the critics' bleak prophecy for the community press. The nondaily newspaper editors who responded to the survey fell into two categories in their beliefs about the functions of their newspapers. The first type has been labeled a feedback orientation and the second, a distributive orientation. The first views the community newspaper as part of

a vibrant communication process within the community, providing information that sparks even more communication back to the newspaper and among community members. The second sees the newspaper as a bulletin board that tells readers routine happenings that require no further discussion.

The two orientations indicated by the results show that there are two ways of perceiving the functions of the community press. As defined by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien[44], the feedback control function of the mass media can be likened to the "watchdog" role of the press. The media serve a feedback or regulatory function for the social system by drawing attention to conflicts and providing a forum for airing differences. Previous researchers have indicated that the feedback function of the community press is dormant, if it exists at all.[45] The present research indicates that, while the distributive function exists in the community press as earlier researchers have expressed, there is also among community editors an orientation toward providing a feedback function for the community.

How the editors rated the newsworthiness of nine hypothetical stories (Table 3) also appears to refute some of the earlier research about the community press and its patterns of distributive information control. The story receiving the highest percentage of "very newsworthy" responses was perhaps the most feedback oriented of all nine stories. The private, unposted city council meeting was declared "very newsworthy" by 69.8 percent of the respondents and it also received the highest mean response (4.34 on 5-point scale--see Table 3).

The fact that a distributive-type item--the schedule for the town festival--followed the first feedback item closely in the ranking, and the continued pattern of interspersed feedback and distributive items throughout the rankings, indicate that the community newspaper has room for both kinds of information and isn't limited to one or the other.

The attitude editors have toward the functions of their newspapers help determine the editors' own operational definitions of newsworthiness that ultimately affect the content of their newspapers. The results of this research show that editors who believe strongly in a feedback function of the community press are more likely to see as newsworthy events that place the focus on community problems and conflict. Editors who feel strongly in the distributive role of their newspapers tend to de-emphasize the conflict and emphasize stories that give readers information about upcoming events such as routine official meetings or civic projects.

One way to illustrate and summarize the different orientations editors have toward the functions of the community press and to show how those attitudes might influence content is to allow a couple of editors to explain. In response to an open-ended question seeking advice for future community journalists, one distributive-oriented editor wrote:

> *Any weekly is hard put to write scoops or "newsy" news. We don't print news, actually, we print history. Communities need their weeklies to provide leadership and insight without leading. Encouraging the community is our prime consideration.*

A feedback-oriented editor wrote:

> *Be prepared for a constant challenge. Over the long haul be prepared for conflict and strong differences with city officials, county government, police, sheriff, pressure from politicians and individuals as well as corporations. Set policies you believe to be fair and proper and do not deviate--even for close friends. Even accept the fact that there will be some outright threats and intimidation. In spite of all, it is a rewarding experience.*

Other results from the survey not listed in this report addressed the relationship between certain background characteristics of the editors and their attitude toward functions of the press and definitions of newsworthiness.[46] While this study attempted to find out what editors feel about the functions of their newspapers and how those attitudes affect their definitions of newsworthiness, analyses of the actual content of the newspapers could provide more in-depth knowledge of general trends discussed in this study.

One characteristic of community journalism that permeates this survey's results but seems to have been ignored in much previous research is the amount and variety of work the job entails. The results show that most editors not only "edit," they write, set type, shoot pictures, perform darkroom work, paste up pages, sell ads, deliver papers, and, in the words of one respondent, "cuss, sweep floors, empty the garbage and repair toilets."[47] Besides the newspaper work, some editors run job printing shops, office supply stores and other businesses on the side to try to stay in the black. It is no wonder that the city council's version of the meeting gets printed if the editor was back at the shop printing photographs, pasting down headlines and

putting newspapers in the racks. There seems to be a thread running throughout the survey that a large number of editors would like to produce a more feedback-oriented product but for such physical restraints as time and money.

The fact that an illegal city council meeting would garner the highest number of "very newsworthy" responses and that the least important function of the community press, according to editors, is to unify the community by avoiding conflict says something important to the critics who claim community journalism is the backyard of the trade. It says that there are some community editors--indeed, perhaps a majority--who view their newspapers as mini-fourth estates in their communities, as watchdogs and not lapdogs of the local power structure.

These editors use their newspapers as a community forum for revealing and discussing issues affecting the lives of local residents and the community. They view their newspapers as active participants in the well-being of their communities--not by avoiding problems but by facilitating solutions through free and open communication.

TABLE 1

NONDAILY EDITORS' EVALUATION OF IMPORTANCE OF TEN FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNITY PRESS

Function	Mean Response*	Standard Deviation	% Responding "Extremely Important"
1. Present facts to inform readers	3.82 (N=169)	.38	82.2
2. Publicize local programs	3.72 (N=168)	.52	75.0
3. Advertising medium	3.70 (N=169)	.49	70.4
4. Successful business	3.54 (N=167)	.69	64.7
5. Stay away from unverifiable news	3.46 (N=166)	.87	66.3
6. Analyze problems of community	3.12 (N=168)	.83	36.3
7. Investigate government	3.09 (N=169)	.82	34.3
8. Provide entertainment,relaxation	2.78 (N=168)	.88	21.4
9. Editorialize about local affairs	2.68 (N=167)	.98	25.1
10. Unify community by avoiding conflict	1.93 (N=162)	1.08	13.6

*Means computed from a 4-point response scale: 1=not really important, 2=somewhat important, 3=quite important, 4= extremely important.

TABLE 2

FUNCTIONS OF THE NONDAILY NEWSPAPER:
A FACTOR ANALYSIS OF
EDITORS' RESPONSES

Function	Factor 1: Feedback Orientation	Factor 2: Distributive Orientation	Factor 3: Commercial Orientation
1. Analyze problems of community	.84	.07	-.07
2. Investigate government	.62	.04	.03
3. Editorialize about local affairs	.57	.08	.03
4. Successful business	.02	.05	.90
5. Advertising medium	.00	.32	.39
6. Publicize local programs	-.03	.47	.26
7. Provide entertainment,relaxation	.13	.42	.13
8. Stay away from unverifiable news	.14	.40	.04
9. Present facts to inform readers	.23	.39	.05
10. Unify community by avoiding conflict	-.09	.24	-.02
Percentage of total variance	49.8%	19.6%	11.4%

TABLE 3-

NONDAILY EDITORS' EVALUATION OF NEWSWORTHINESS OF NINE HYPOTHETICAL STORIES

Story	Mean*	S.D.**	Percent Responding "Very Newsworthy"
1. Illegal city council meeting	4.34 (N=169)	1.16	69.8
2. Schedule for town festival	4.33 (N=169)	.88	54.4
3. Analysis of local schools	4.31 (N=166)	.91	52.4
4. Real estate development pollution	4.30 (N=167)	1.04	61.7
5. County commissioner embezzlement charge	4.18 (N=169)	1.21	60.4
6. Regular meeting of city council	4.17 (N=168)	.95	48.2
7. City cleanup day announcement	4.03 (N=167)	1.01	40.1
8. Heated exchange between two school board members	3.40 (N=167)	1.21	22.8
9. Chamber president DWI arrest	2.95 (N=167)	1.32	16.8

*Means computed from a 5-point response scale: 1=not newsworthy, 5=very newsworthy.

**Standard deviation

TABLE 4

NEWSWORTHINESS OF HYPOTHETICAL STORIES:
A FACTOR ANALYSIS OF
EDITORS' RESPONSES

Story	Factor 1: Feedback News	Factor 2: Distributive News
1. County commissioner charged with embezzling public gas	.76	.07
2. Illegal city council meeting	.69	.15
3. Local real estate development charged with pollution	.69	.27
4. Chamber president arrested for driving while intoxicated	.60	-.02
5. Heated debate between two school board members	.48	.10
6. Announcement of community cleanup day	-.07	.86
7. Schedule for upcoming town festival	.06	.76
8. Regularly scheduled city council meeting	.24	.54
9. Analysis of quality of local schools	.31	.44
Percentage of total variance	79.9%	15.9%

TABLE 5

PEARSON CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN EDITORS' ATTITUDES TOWARD COMMUNITY PRESS FUNCTIONS AND TWO DIFFERENT TYPES OF NEWS

Newsworthiness of:	Feedback Function (r)	Distributive Function (r)
1. Feedback news	.29***	.13
2. Distributive news	-.04	.33***

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

FOOTNOTES

1. Ben Bagdikian, "Beyond the Grassroots Press, Alas!" Harpers, December 1964, p.102.

2. See, for example, Bagdikian, ibid., and John L. Hulteng and Roy Paul Nelson, The Fourth Estate, (New York: Harper and Row, 1983, 2nd edition), pp.4-7.

3. Journalism Quarterly, for example, lists only nine research articles under the topic "Community Journalism" in their ten-year cumulative index to Volumes 51-60, 1974-83.

4. See, for example, Hodding Carter, Where Main Street Meets the River, (New York: Rinehart, 1953).

5. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984.

6. William Kuvlesky, "Rural America Changing," San Marcos Record, Dec. 22, 1983, p. 8.

7. John Naisbitt, Megatrends, (New York: Warner, 1984), p.140.

8. Ibid.

9. Gene Burd, "What Is Community?" Grassroots Editor, 20:1 (Spring, 1980), pp.3-5.

10. George E. Padgett, "What Community Press?" Grassroots Editor, 22 (Fall, 1981), pp. 3-5

11. Ibid.

12. Charles R. Wright, "Functional Analysis and Mass Communication," in Lewis Anthony Dexter and David Manning White, eds. People, Society and Mass Communication, (New York: MacMillan, 1964).

13. See, for example, E. J. Gerald, The Social Responsibility of the Press, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963); and William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, Responsibility in Mass Communication, (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

14. W. Small, To Kill a Messenger: Television News and the Real World, (New York: Hastings House, 1970).

15. Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue and Clarice N. Olien, Community Conflict and the Press, (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), p. 17.

16. Ibid., p. 19.

17. Morris Janowitz, The Community Press in an Urban Setting, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 76.

18. Ibid.

19. Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Benson, Small Town in Mass Society, (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 308.

20. Robert M. Shaw and Lee Irwin, cited in John Cameron Sim, The Grass Roots Press: America's Community Newspaperse, (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1969. The study was conducted in 1960.

21. Alex S. Edelstein and J. Blaine Schulz, "The Leadership Role of the Weekly Newspaper as Seen by Community Leaders: A Sociological Perspective," in Lewis Anthony Dexter and David Manning White, eds., People, Society and Mass Communication, (New York: MacMillan, 1963).

22. Olien, Clarice N., George A. Donohue and Phillip J. Tichenor, "The Community Editor's Power and Reporting of Conflict," Journalism Quarterly, 45, pp. 243-252.

23. J.K. Hvistendahl, "Publisher's Power: Functional or Dysfunctional?" Journalism Quarterly 47, pp. 472-478.

24. Robert Drechsel, Kermit Netteburg and Bisi Aborisade, "Community Size and Newspaper Reporting of Local Courts," Journalism Quarterly 59 (Spring, 1982), pp. 71-78.

25. See Michael Singletary and Thomas Bowes, "Weeklies and the J-Grad," Grassroots Editor, 20 (Spring, 1980), pp.7-8, which discusses problems academically trained journalism graduates face when they work for non-academic bosses in community journalism.

26. Harry W. Stonecipher and Douglas A. Anderson, "Staff Time and Money," Grassroots Editor, 20 (Summer, 1980), p. 2.

27. John W.C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski and William W. Bowman, The News People, (Urbana: University of Illionis Press, 1976).

28. Ibid., pp. 114-119.

29. Ibid., p. 540.

30. Hugh M. Culbertson, "Three Perspectives on American Journalism," Journalism Monographs, 83 (June, 1983).

31. Ibid., pp. 23-26.

32. Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman, pp. 114-119, op. cit.

33. Culbertson, pp. 26, op.cit.

34. Janowitz, op.cit., and Warren Breed, "Mass Communication and Social Integration," Social Forces 37 (December, 1958), pp. 109-116.

35. Tichenor, Olien and Donohue, pp. 85-86, op.cit.

36. See Janowitz, Vidich and Benson, Breed and Olien, Tichenor and Donnohue, op.cit.

37. Texas Press Association, 1984 Texas Newspaper Directory, (Austin, 1984).

38. Johnstone, pp. 114-119, op.cit.

39. Ibid.

40. The factor-scale variable formula is recommended and further explained in Norman H. Nie, C. Hadlai Hull, Jean G. Jenkins, Karin Steibrenner and Dale H. Brent, SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Studies, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975, 2nd edition), p.489.

41. Johnstone, pp. 114-119, op.cit.

42. Shaw and Irwin, op.cit.

43. Janowitz, op.cit.

44. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, pp. 85-86, op.cit.

45. Ibid.

46. Using Pearson's r to correlate the editor's orientations toward types of news with various other characteristics, the following is a brief summary. More complete results can be requested from the author. The editors' formal education, age and sex were related to the editors' orientations toward functions of the community press. The higher the level of education, the more likely an editor will subscribe to a feedback puprpose. Older editors tend to favor the distributive role. Men in the survey were more feedback-oriented than women. Community size correlated positively with the feedback orientation, indicating that the larger the community, the more oriented toward the feedback function the editor will be. Size of staff also correlated positively with the feedback orientation.

47. Editors quoted directly from questionnaires. Contact the author for further information.